

On Prayer and Trust and Other Hard Things Psalm 27:1, 13-14 Romans 8:38-39

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This is Kate Bowler. She was married in her twenties, had a baby in her thirties, and won a job at her alma mater, Duke Divinity School, right after she graduated. At that time in her life she felt certain that God had a worthy plan for her life in which every setback would also be a step forward. She wanted God to make her good and faithful, with a few shining accolades along the way. As she puts it, “anything would do if hardships were only detours on my long life’s journey.”

That outlook on life, and faith, changed when Kate was 35 and diagnosed with Stage 4 colon cancer. She has written a book based on her ongoing journey with cancer; it’s entitled Everything Happens for a Reason... the subtitle is “And Other Lies I’ve Loved.” I recommend the book, particularly for the last section which is her list of things never to say to someone experiencing a crisis.

Her book is part memoir and part theology. She writes about how it feels to receive such a devastating diagnosis at such a young age. She writes about the things people say to her, the helpful things and also - the comments which are well-intentioned but most especially not helpful. And she reflects on this life experience as a theologian, as someone well-versed in the way our culture thinks about tragedy and crisis.

Her journey with cancer is causing her to rethink the assumptions she had about her life. Ironically, her teaching specialty and the topic of her first book is what is called “the prosperity gospel,” a mostly American way of thinking about the world in which people come to believe that God grants health and wealth to those with the right kind of faith. You encounter the prosperity gospel when you hear a preacher on TV say that it is God’s will that all people become rich, and you also encounter it when you pick up a self-help book that says that anything is possible if you only approach it with a positive attitude. The prosperity gospel has an answer for everything, it purports a philosophy of absolute certainty, and it teaches people that all of life is within our control.

One problem with the prosperity gospel is that it fails people at a time when they need God the most. It causes people to blame themselves when bad things happen, torturing themselves with questions like, “Was I just not on enough prayer lists?” “Am I being punished for something?” The other problem is that it’s not biblical. The Bible never says that bad things won’t happen to good people. We may wish it did, but it doesn’t.

The Bible has been used to try to justify a lot of horrible things. The Bible has been used to justify slavery, and antisemitism and intolerance of homosexuality and the subjugation of women. Just this week a politician cited one biblical passage, out of context, and said it was the reason for an extremely controversial practice that is causing most Americans to feel horrified. Every single religious organization I know of, from the Southern Baptist Convention to the UCC to the National Conference on Catholic Bishops, has condemned the

practice of separating children from their parents, and railed against Attorney General Sessions for his misuse of the Bible to try to justify such actions.

You can pluck a verse out of the Bible and use it as a weapon, or use it to try to win an argument. But none of those are responsible faithful uses of scripture. What we teach in Bible Study here is that our biblical authority comes from the life and teachings of Jesus. Read the gospels, pay attention to the way Jesus lived, the way he treated people, the stories he told and you will begin to form a description of his character. Then you can measure everything else in the Bible against that. You see a verse about violence and you hold it up to the light and ask, "Does this seem like something Jesus would say or teach?" You read a verse that seems to encourage intolerance, and you hold that next to the parable of the Good Samaritan. You hear someone say that it is God's will that all people become rich, and you compare that with the way Jesus lived and his sayings on money and wealth and his treatment of the poor. Watch the way Jesus treated children and you will know his heart.

We have to speak up when the gospel is being distorted. This is why many young people leave the church - they hear that it stands for hatred and bigotry and they are hearing from people like us.

Kate Bowler says that we have all picked up some of the teachings of the prosperity gospel along the way, often subconsciously. We sometimes act as if praying is stepping up to the vending machine, making our selection, putting in our payment, and waiting impatiently for God to give us what we want. We sometimes pray as if the purpose of prayer were to receive an answer.

What if life is meant to be uncertain? What if we are intended to live with mystery? What if the purpose of prayer is not to receive an answer, but to enter into a conversation with the holy?

Some people are under the assumption that there is a right way to pray, and that if you pray correctly, your prayers will be answered. But if you look at the examples of prayer in the bible, you see something entirely different. You see person after person who is, as the saying goes, “all prayed out”. After years of praying for a child with no results, Abraham and Sarah felt all prayed out. Frustrated with leading the people of Israel through the wilderness, Moses felt all prayed out. Sick in body, mind and spirit, Job felt all prayed out. After denying Jesus three times, Peter felt all prayed out. At one point in his life, even Jesus felt all prayed out. The authorities were breathing down his neck. Powerful people wanted him dead. He had less than a day to live. So he went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, asking God to spare his life. Hanging on the cross, he cried out, “Why have you forsaken me?”*

Some people believe that religious questions, struggles and doubts are a sin - but they are wrong. Doubt is not the enemy of faith but part of faith. Madeleine l’Engle, the author of [A Wrinkle in Time](#) and other books was asked, “Do you believe in God without any doubts?” She replied, “I believe in God with all my doubts.”

In her book [Help Thanks Wow](#), Anne LaMott says that sometimes the best prayer we can pray is simply this one word, “Help.” “When I pray, which I do many times a day, I pray for a lot of things. I ask for health and happiness for my

friends, and for their children. This is okay to do, to ask God to help them have a sense of peace, and for them to feel the love of God. I pray for our leaders to act in the common good. I pray that aid and comfort be rushed to people after catastrophes. I ask for help for this planet, and for all who are poor.”

Let me give you some examples of different kinds of prayers that people have found meaningful and helpful. This is from the Catholic monk and writer Thomas Merton:

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

nor do I really know myself,

and the fact that I think I am following your will

does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you

does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,

though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though

I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

A much more simple prayer from a Jewish woman:

Help for the sick and hungry,
home for the homeless folk,
peace in the world forever,
this is my prayer, O Lord. Amen.

And here is one Anne Lamott wrote, in her distinctive humorous style:

“Hi God.

I am just a mess.

It is all hopeless.

What else is new?

I would be sick of me, if I were You, but miraculously You are not.

I know I have no control over other people’s lives, and I hate this. Yet I believe
that if I accept this and surrender, You will meet me wherever I am...

Thank you in advance for Your company and blessings.

You have never once let me down.

Amen.

She uses the word “surrender”; Thomas Merton uses the word “trust” and this, it seems to me, is the outcome of a prayer life. We begin to surrender the illusion of control. We begin to trust God. Prayer changes us. It reminds us that God is God, and that it is not our job to be anyone else’s higher power.

Prayer is not a magic wand. We can’t wish away cancer or dementia or anxiety; we can’t put our prayer request in the vending machine and look for immediate reconciliation to a broken relationship or the perfect job or comfort after a devastating loss. But it happens that people survive unsurvivable losses and experience happiness again. It happens that love starts to flow again when both people had given up hope. It happens that the clouds of depression lift, it happens that death is not the end of the story.

Kate Bowler writes, “What would it mean for Christians to give up that little piece of the American dream that says, ‘you are limitless.’ Everything is not possible. The Kingdom of God is not yet here. We will not all be wealthy, but we can all be rich. We will not all be healed but we can all be whole. What if being people of the gospel means that we are simply people with good news? God is here. We are loved. It is enough. “

*Other references: [What’s The Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?](#),

Martin Thielen